



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

The history behind Alexandria's Freedom House

Alexandria Times, May 9, 2019

Image: Freedom House Museum

Many visitors to Alexandria walk past the slate gray building located at 1315 Duke St. without a second glance, while some Alexandrians are aware of the infamous history associated with this building and its role in the domestic slave trade. Most people know nothing of men who started this business and the years of horror and tragedy they began when they arrived in Alexandria.

In 1828, Isaac Franklin and John Armfield paid \$2,500 for the Alexandria Slave Pen at 1315 Duke St. There they established one of the largest domestic slave trading firms in the country. John Armfield lived in the building with his wife, Martha – Isaac Franklin's niece – while Franklin handled their business dealings in New Orleans, Louisiana and Natchez, Mississippi. By 1835, they had captured nearly half of the coastal slave trade from Virginia and Maryland to New Orleans. They sold the business in 1836 and retired as some of the wealthiest men of the time. Following their tenure in the building, four other slave dealers operated out of the site until the occupation of Alexandria in 1861.

In an example of poetic justice, the Northern Virginia Urban League, a community-based organization devoted to empowering minorities, purchased the building in 1996. They opened the Freedom House Museum on the lower level in 2008. In 2018, the Office of Historic Alexandria entered into a collaboration with the NVUL. The partnership is dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of this historic site. Those wishing to make donations may contact OHA at 703-746-4554. Museum visiting hours are Fridays and Saturdays, between 1 and 5 p.m., and admission is \$5.

In honor of Preservation Month in Alexandria, there is an opportunity to learn more about this building and the men who built an empire through the trafficking of enslaved men, women and children. On May 16 at 7 p.m. at the Alexandria History Museum at The Lyceum, Dr. Joshua Rothman, the foremost expert on Franklin and Armfield, will give a lecture titled "What Happened in That House on Duke Street: The Story of the Men Who Transformed the Domestic Slave Trade?"

Joshua Rothman is a professor of history and chair of the history department at the University of Alabama. He is the author of several books including, most recently, "Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson." His current book project, under contract with Basic Books is tentatively titled "The Ledger and the Chain: A Biography of the Domestic Slave Trade." The fee for Dr. Rothman's lecture is \$10. Tickets may be purchased on the Office of Alexandria website at <https://shop.alexandriava.gov>.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.